Kathy Acker

Born in 1948, avant-garde novelist Kathy Acker hung out in New York with the FLUXUS group and underground filmmakers in the '60s. At Brandeis University she studied with Herbert Marcuse, following him to UC San Diego. Back in New York she studied with Jerome Rothenberg and hung out in the early punk rock scene while writing art criticism, book reviews and prose pieces. Her libretto, *The Birth of a Poet,* was produced as an opera at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

In the past two decades Kathy Acker has written thirteen novels, whose sexually explicit language, multiple personas, plagiarism and sheer linguistic inventiveness embody a subversive sensibility: *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula; Florida; I Dreamt I was a Nymphomaniac Imagining; The Adult Life of Toulouse-Lautrec; Hello, I'm Erica Jong; Kathy Goes to Haiti; Blood and Guts in High School; Great Expectations; Don Quixote; My Death, My Life, by Pier Paolo Pasolini; Empire of the Senseless; In Memoriam to Identity* and *Hannibal Lecter, My Father.* During most of the '80s Kathy lived in London and Paris. Currently she lives in the Bay Area and teaches *performance* at the San Francisco Art Institute.

♦ **ANDREA JUNO: How has sexism affected your life?**

♦ KATHY ACKER: *All things are sexist!* Pornography is sexist, books are sexist, magazines are sexist. For many historical reasons, there is this fear of sex—in women. It was a big step when women said, "*We'll* start making pornography; *we'll* take over those areas." It's fantastic that women are doing this! And men just can't deal with it—that's what all this recent censorship is about: the men are freaking out!

♦ **AJ: In your writing, an inversion of gender sometimes occur where you become the male role. Can you talk about that?**

♦ KA: Actually, it's different in different books. In early books, the characters (to the extent that they were "characters") changed gender a lot: I never got "his" and "her" right! And the dumb reason was: I just didn't remember, I didn't care, it meant nothing to me. Until I met Sylvère Lotringer [*Semiotext(e)* editor], I didn't understand a lot of the reasons I wrote the way I did. I did things without any theory—I did whatever just seemed intuitively "right." But I think the reason was probably my *hatred of gender* . . . a hatred of the expectation that I had to become my womb. My hatred of being defined by the fact that I had a cunt. And as a kid I really resented the fact that I couldn't be a pirate! There were these great lesbian or bisexual pirates who would disguise themselves as men—like Annie Bonney, whose gender was only discovered after her death.

♦ **VALE: How did you actually lose your virginity?**

♦ KA: I grew up during the days of the Double Standard, so you weren't supposed to have sex, but what happened was: all the boys we dated (who went to boys' schools) would go to Europe and get seduced by older women, then come back and seduce *us*. I was easily seduced—it didn't take much! I was 13.

My parents were so anti-sex that they never gave me any sex education—how I avoided getting pregnant I'll never know. I remember the time this boy and I were fucking in a cemetery. I was having my period and he thought he had taken away my virginity, so he got all romantic. I couldn't tell him otherwise, because he was

Photo: Chris Buck

really into this High Romance of Virginity! But that was my first orgasm—right away I understood: "Wow, this is what it's all about! *Shit!*"

When I started going to college, it was cool to fuck, because that was the beginning of the hippie days. So then I had no guilt whatsoever—I mean, my girlfriends and I would go out *prowling* every night. We'd pass 'em on to each other ("You have him next!"); we had charts of the lengths of cocks; we were *really into sex!* One girl, Susie Sampson, was the only virgin in our freshman class. So we all decided: "Susie, you gotta lose it!" The guy was picked, they got along okay, and during her first time she got gonorrhea!

♦ **AJ: Now AIDS has changed everything.**

♦ KA: Oh god—my first roommate at college ran an orgy in the room. I think her father was a trustee so she got away with it. She covered the whole room with green carpet and mattresses and it was like *orgy-time!* I moved out after 3 weeks because I never knew who was going to be in my bed, and it was hard to study. She had a dog named "Magic" who just *loved* genitals (both male and female)—she had trained it with pieces of meat. You'd be sitting at the dining room table and—all of us had holes in our blue jeans between our legs so that Magic could go from person to person. I guess those were the good old days . . .

♦ **V: When did the pill come in?**

♦ KA: I started taking it in college. Abortions were *illegal* in those days—there was one doctor in Philadelphia and we all used to chip in whenever somebody needed an abortion. I remember hearing horror stories of illegal abortions: women taping irons to their bodies and throwing themselves down flights of stairs, and then they'd have the baby in traction! Of course, there were countless coat-hanger stories.

♦ **V: Didn't you work in the sex industry?**

♦ KA: When I was in San Diego I worked as a stripper. There were these 3 clubs in San Diego and you went around in this pink Cadillac from club to club. They're burlesque clubs, you do your act, and you don't have to serve drinks or talk to customers. You would dance, get off stage and into the pink Cadillac and be driven to the next club; you would go around and around all night. So you'd spend all your time with the other girls.

Those were the days when everyone did drugs; these women would take anything—the most amazing combinations. I wasn't a big druggie, so I was always ending up having to work hard at the end of the night, because someone would be passed out. Anyway, these women would tell great, incredible stories—especially once the drugs got going. So what I did was: I copied them down. But I didn't want to be like a sociologist, so I would retell them in the first person, then put in some of my dreams. I had all this text consisting of these great stories plus my dreams—there was a murder story; some things were pretty wild!

♦ **V: Were you ever married?**

♦ KA: I was married twice. The first time I got married because that was the only way I could get money from my parents. But it didn't *mean* anything; we were hippies—I was 19 years old. The second time I got married was because I'd lived with this guy for 6 years and thought I was dying. I had this lump in my breast and the doctors said it was cancerous, but it turned out to be just this cyst.

Actually, getting married fucked up the relationship. It was sick, because before we'd had kind of a good relationship worked out; we'd lived together for six years. We didn't have sex anymore; it was just a family thing, we both had our lovers. So I just thought we'd be *partners*—besides, our families expected this. But after we got married, he got jealous of my lover—all that baggage came in. So now I think it's a bad idea to get married—besides, everyone starts treating you like this "couple."

♦ **AJ: When you first started getting tattoos, was this as an expression of reclaiming the body?**

♦ KA: Well, when I first got tattoos I did so because I just thought they were so beautiful . . . Tattooing seemed to be a real form of art—an *amazing* form of art, because it's art that's on your flesh. So you have a certain relationship to the artist that's very close—it's magical, really.

Some people see me as a bit weird because I have tattoos and I'm a woman (you know: if a woman has a tattoo, it's supposed to be a very delicate little one that's hidden on her breast or somewhere; you're not supposed to *do* these things). I guess I thought, "I'm old enough—I can start doing what I want. I'm over the age of beauty anyway, so what the hell!" After the age of 30, you're not supposed to be "beautiful"—so then you can start having *fun!*

If, every day I thought about all the things I'm not "supposed" to do because I'm a woman, and all the ways in which I'm not supposed to be—*I couldn't exist.* What I've done is: I've buried all that in my mind. And there's an amazing strata of anger in me—when it's touched, it just comes ripping out! So I don't think about tattooing as a way of asserting control over my own body—although it obviously *is*—because I can't touch that anger every day. It's not that I dislike men—I don't at all, but I dislike the fact that because you're a woman, you can't do things . . . that the word "NO!" is the very first word you learn and it's burnt in your flesh.

♦ **AJ: I think most women really have to deal with that bedrock of rage and anger.**

♦ KA: Well, we were taught to channel anger, rage, feelings of insecurity—to channel what would-be "negative" energy *masochistically.* We were taught not to do it *directly*—not to go out and hit someone, for example—but to do it so we'd hurt *ourselves.* And that's a typical feminine ploy to deal with power . . . in a way it's because you *don't* have power, but you're *looking* for power.

♦ **AJ: At the same time this gets inverted when you make a beautiful artwork on your skin—**

♦ KA: I think this is a bit how art is created. Julia Kristeva has written a book, *Powers of Horror,* about this: art doesn't come from a gesture that resembles one man going to hit another man; art comes from a gesture of power turned against itself. She calls it "ejection": when you take that emotion and turn it *in* on itself—which is what tattooing does, or what women do. And I'd say women are almost "natural" artists—we're just trained to do that over and over, so we have an amazing sense of beauty. And we decorate ourselves; we constantly walk around the world finding patterns of sensuality.

Makeup isn't frivolous; it's another form of art. And what we've done with our bodies is a form of art throughout the ages . . . yet it's always been put down. Whatever we do—that we learn how to dress well, or decorate our bodies a certain way, or walk a certain way . . . that we learn how to be elegant and charming and how to please people—all this is ridiculed, yet it's a form of art—a very high art! Again, I think a certain range of feminists have been scared by this, so they say, "Oh god—*I* won't wear makeup." And that's absolutely ridiculous.

♦ **AJ: Underlying all that is the *denial of the body,* the denial of what women have excelled in. Going back to your tattoos: how do people react to them?**

My first roommate at college ran an orgy in the room. She covered the whole room with green carpet and mattresses and it was like *orgy-time!* I moved out after 3 weeks because I never knew who was going to be in my bed, and it was hard to study.

♦ KA: Most people tell me they like them. I've never gotten anything negative from a guy . . . only women. I think it's the women who are more scared, because what women have done is to internalize this bad girl/good girl distinction, and out of fear say, "I've got to be a good girl; I'm not going to be a bad girl." So *they're* the ones who really get down on the so-called bad girls. I think women are really scared of taking control of themselves, and the men—well, there seems to be some crisis; the men seem to be absolutely *floundering* about: "Should they be strong? Should they be weak? How should they act? Maybe it's better to hide in a hole." Men don't know what to do at all—they don't want to appear to be the macho pigs they *are.* So everybody's walking around in fear these days, because the roles are absolutely not clear anymore.

Now in the battered wife relationship, it seems to me that to begin with: something is done to the woman

against her will. Usually it's in a situation of dependency—there's economic dependency, or children—for whatever reasons, she feels she can't leave this man who's been beating her. So she *takes it*—she does not leave at that point. But this is definitely against her will; she's not *asking* to be beaten. And when you're in a relationship (it doesn't even have to be one in which you're being *hit)* where the other person starts doing bad things to you, but you're scared to leave the relationship, you can start to think that *pain is pleasure* . . .

I dislike the fact that because you're a woman, you can't do things . . . that the word "NO!" is the very first word you learn.

We're very adaptable. It's well-known that some of the Jews in Auschwitz adapted to the concentration camp, which is probably as hard a form of adaptation as you can do. Some women who are in a situation which is terrible for them don't see a way out, so they adapt. And one way to adapt is: to find pleasurable what is not, because you can't live in total pain all the time. Even physically, if you undergo a lot of pain, your endorphins will switch around and start interpreting it as pleasure. Or you'll just numb out . . .

Look—I don't know why various people want pain. I think there's a huge number of reasons. Let's say we divide "sensation" into: pain and pleasure. Everyone thinks they understand why you would want pleasure, but not pain . . . but pain can be *interesting.* First of all, when you body-build, in order to really build you have to go through pain—you *burn.* If you don't burn, you don't build. The first time I burned, I wanted to run away, but my trainer said, "No! Just go *through* the pain." And I learned how to relax and not fight pain, and I think that's not a bad technique to learn. In certain tribes, rites of passage (when you go from one stage to another) involve a great deal of pain. That's another kind of pain, and that would be to physically shock you into another level of awareness (I've never done a rite-of-passage, so I don't know). There's a quote from Nietzsche: "That which does not kill you, will only make you grow."

I don't know how to talk about a utopian world. We live in *this* world and there's a lot of suffering. If you learn how to deal with physical pain, maybe you can deal with what's really much greater pain. Now if we're talking about an S&M relationship—the ones I know about are just *play,* really, which means if there's some pain it's "scratch pain"—little razor blade cuts which every kid does, a little play with dangerous weapons—*toys!* We're not talking about huge amounts of pain. And I'm just talking about my own experience; I know that many people have done other stuff—there's a realm of S&M relationships that are very dangerous. But I think there's a way in which you play with what you most fear in order to learn how to deal with it—that's one thing you do. Another thing is: you're curious about your body—how will your body react to this? And it's not only just pain, it's also how you react in terms of being *controlled.* So you play with various areas.

Sexuality and play are very close, and when people start repressing and denying that play aspect, it's absolutely silly. I used to be terribly scared of cigarettes and fire, and this German boyfriend said to me, "Look, Kathy, I'll show you a game German kids play." And what they do is, they take lit cigarettes and just toss them back and forth from hand to hand. And they're doing it so fast that it doesn't burn. But I was frightened out of my mind; it took ages before I'd trust him enough to play this game with him. So I think it's all very complicated . . .

♦ **AJ: There's a continuum between pain and sexuality. Even "normal" sex includes biting and scratching.**

♦ KA: Well, my body is such that—it's very personal, but I have a tremendously overactive clit that can almost not bear to be touched—I'd prefer to be touched on almost *any* other part of my body than to have my clit touched! So the average man who wants to be a non-macho pig wants to go down on you, right? But I go, "Don't do it; absolutely do *not* do it! Spank me, do anything—here's a whip—but do not go *near* that!" Now that's not like I'm some victim or I'm being submissive; this is *my* body—I've got a weird body! [laughs] That's what I mean: sex is so unique from person to person. And from what a lot of my girlfriends tell me, I'd say about 50% of them don't cum from being fucked. No one's ever gone into this one, like: *how do you cum?* And if we talk about all the different ways we have to play, what we have to do to cum, what really gets us off—all this is *forbidden.* Yet this is the realm of pleasure!

♦ **AJ: And there's that continuum between pain and pleasure—**

♦ KA: That's what I mean: it *hurts* me to have my clit touched. Whereas if I get spanked it doesn't hurt as much, and I'll cum much faster! That's just the way my body is.

♦ **AJ: If you let a person spank you, can someone accuse you of being traditionally submissive?**

♦ KA: No one who knows me calls me submissive; just people who read my books get on this track: "All the women are so submissive." Well—not really! [laughs] A typical scenario goes: some guy wants to go down on me, and I go, "Don't do it! Don't do it!" And they feel very hurt, because guys now have this grand thing in their mind that if they do this wonderful thing of going down on you, you should be eternally grateful, and how can you deny this to them—it's as if you told them they had a small cock or something. I try to suggest, "Why don't you spank me a little?" and they go [gasp], "I couldn't do

something like that!" And I go, "Oh yes you could!" "Oh no, I can't!" Here I'd say I'm not being submissive at all! I'm trying to make *them* submissive to what *I* want, and trying to figure out how to connive them into doing precisely what I want.

They always say the masochist is in control, and to some extent that has to be true. Because if the masochist isn't controlling, then it's rape or some horror story or it's a crime. I once asked this German boyfriend, "Why does a sadist *do* it? I don't get it. Why does anyone want to go to all that trouble? I get off so much more than you do. You don't get any pleasure out of this. What do you get out of this? What do you like?" And he said, "It's the tension." Yet the masochist is controlling that tension—there'd be no tension otherwise.

This boyfriend just loves situations of more and more tension. And it's not like I'm controlling—he's controlling, really. It just gets into this incredible amount of tension so you don't know *who's* controlling; you just keep pushing the situation so you can get the most tension out of it. It's like you set up an area of play and you just see how far you can go. Then it gets a little addictive so you have to stop, because it can get a little dangerous. It's like playing, "Let's go out into the street and see if cars will run us over!" It's kids' games, and I'm just a big kid; I've just never properly grown up. So I like motorcycles, I like kids' games. I don't really see this as being submissive at all. If we play a game about being submissive, it's just to get the tension going . . . to see how far everybody can get pushed. You do that in friendships; you push each other and see how far you can go.

Photo: Jill Posener

◆ **AJ: Here one word is covering two *very* different situations.**

◆ KA: Actually, submissive women freak me out; I like women who know what they're doing . . . I guess everybody makes a choice, somewhere down the line: that they're going to abide by society's rules and hide in their nice suburban house and do just what they're told and they're not going to step out of line—and maybe, just *maybe*, they'll be "safe." (I don't know what they'll be "safe" for, however.) My father made this type of decision; I saw him get a heart attack and suddenly he realized that he wasn't safe—he was about to die. He had done everything by the rules and it hadn't done him a goddam bit of good . . . he had *nothing* to hold on to. Because he didn't have any values—all his values were the values of society, they weren't his. There was nothing *in* him.

I think the other choice is: to find what your value is . . . to find who you are and where your energy is, where your ground is, where your guts are, where your centers are—however you want to put it. People are searching for their centers (be they centers of pleasure, pain, whatever) but really in a way it's a search for "god." And in this search—that's when someone starts being interesting, and stops being like jello. There are various ways of going about this search for "god."

Those of us who don't want to split the mind and the body go through ways that are considered abnormal, and

play is definitely an area where you can investigate certain things with some realm of safety. Because you've seen various artists who have died in this attempt—and you *don't* want to die! But it's a dangerous search, obviously, because there aren't many guidelines. I think that's what we're really talking about, and I don't want to take sex away from that. But really, it's all about this *search.* And we're being denied it by our repressive society.

♦ **AJ: It's about facing death, which your father couldn't do—**

♦ KA: Yeah! We're all going to die; that's the one *given* we've got. We know it, but what we *don't* know is what this life is about!

♦ **AJ: We try to keep the mind/body together and not have that repressive split. Because in order to get illumination you cannot deny the body.**

♦ KA: Well, there were ways in which nuns and monks denied the body in order to get farther. I think there's a way in which the energy comes up another way, but that's very radical . . .

A gay friend of mine said something interesting to me. I asked her if she differentiated between gay and straight women, and she said, "Yes, women who are gay are really outlaws, because we're totally outside the society—*always.*" And I said, "What about people like me?" and she said, "Oh, you're just *queer.*" Like—we didn't exist?! [laughs] It's as if the gay women position themselves as outside society, but meanwhile *they're* looking down on everybody who's perverse! Which is very peculiar. . .

In a relationship where the other person starts doing bad things to you, but you're scared to leave the relationship, you can start to think that *pain is pleasure* . . .

♦ **AJ: This happens a lot to outlawed minorities, who try desperately (in a denial fashion) to gain some sort of acceptance. In the tattoo world, there used to be almost this hatred of piercing, because the tattooers were trying to make tattooing "respectable."**

♦ KA: Everyone makes these arbitrary "definitions" in order to establish how "straight" they are.

♦ **AJ: It was like: "*Tattooing's* pretty normal . . . but god forbid you have a pierced nipple!"**

♦ KA: When I used to work as a stripper, all the strippers didn't want any whores in the club, right? So these 3 transvestite whores came in one night, and the strippers were screaming: "Get them *out* of here; we don't want women like that in here! We're *good* women!" [laughs]

♦ **AJ: You're still damned—you may as well be as outrageous as you wanna be!**

♦ KA: Well, I'm not much of a moralist that way. I have a friend who's always getting lipo-something, or getting her face changed—she does that. But tattooing—to me, it's a form of art and I'm dealing with a tattooer who's putting his/her art on my body. Whereas if I got lipo-whatever, it would be to conform to an image that's presented in *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan.* A lot of women my age are heavily into dieting—to me that's another form of that lipo-stuff. They're basically anorexic. Whereas I eat like a pig, but I body-build—so I don't eat *enough.* I can't stand surgery—it drives me nuts. I once had a little cyst in my breast taken out, and I said, "*Never again!* Even if I get cysts in my breasts—I don't care!"

I saw this film by Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning,* about Puerto-Rican and Black queens who dress up to be whoever they want, and they have contests. By my standards it was very radical, because they'd want to be the richest man in the world, or they'd want to be the head of the Pentagon, or they'd want to be a fashion model—there was no irony, it was like Postmodernism without the irony. They wanted to be just whoever they wanted to be without any politics or idea of "Left" or "Right" or whatever. And they went in and sort of showed off; they did these kind of *Vogue*-like dances [like *Vogue* models going down a runway]. It was hot!

When interviewed, some of them said, "Listen, we know that in this society a gay black man is a piece of shit, and a gay black man isn't anything, so we've done this because we know this is how we're going to get what we want. This way I can be anything and people are finally going to accept me because I'm going to be famous!" I mean, they weren't dumb. And if plastic surgery were like that—I can see it. It's the sense of *play* that I like—I like the art, I like the play, I like the extremity of it. But just women going around getting their thighs skinny so some guy'll fuck them—ugh!

♦ **AJ: We're talking about two different things. If you really are obsessive and have this creative idea to remake your body, then doing it *by any means* (liposuction, facelifts) could be a creative art form. But most people have actually *given up* their creativity, so this kind of remaking of the body is used for societal control. Sometimes a woman might like her breasts, but her husband *doesn't,* so getting breast surgery is not even for *herself*—**

♦ KA: —they're like puppets or zombies. These PR Queens who were doing the *Vogueing* were definitely searching; they weren't puppets . . .

♦ **AJ: The key factor is the motivation behind it, that searching—**

♦ KA: The difference between the liposuction/anorexic behavior of certain women, and women who get tattooed or do every extreme body modification, is: the first class of women are just looking to come as close as possible to certain norms that they've internalized. They've taken an image out of a magazine or they've taken a number of images and thought, "This is how I

should look; this is how I should be." Whereas the second class of women are actively searching for who to be, and it has to do with *their own pleasure,* their *own* feeling of identity—they're not *obeying*—they're not obeying the normal society. They're looking—it's very different. And when you look, you know you're "failing," you know you're "inferior." You're inferior because you're *looking;* there's always something *missing.* And it's *interesting* when there's something missing—it's *not* interesting when people think they're "gods" in that very stupid way. It's interesting when there's suffering there, and people are full of feeling, and they're full of life, and they're constantly making choices.

◆ AJ: There's something moving about people who are really searching: who have the honesty to face up and admit, "I am inferior." It's a continuum: facing inferiority, facing death, facing who you are . . .

◆ KA: Yeah! All of us have had these choices. I mean: you could have married and had a nice suburban house and two dogs and a cat and three children (or whatever they have these days). But you've made the decision not to do that.

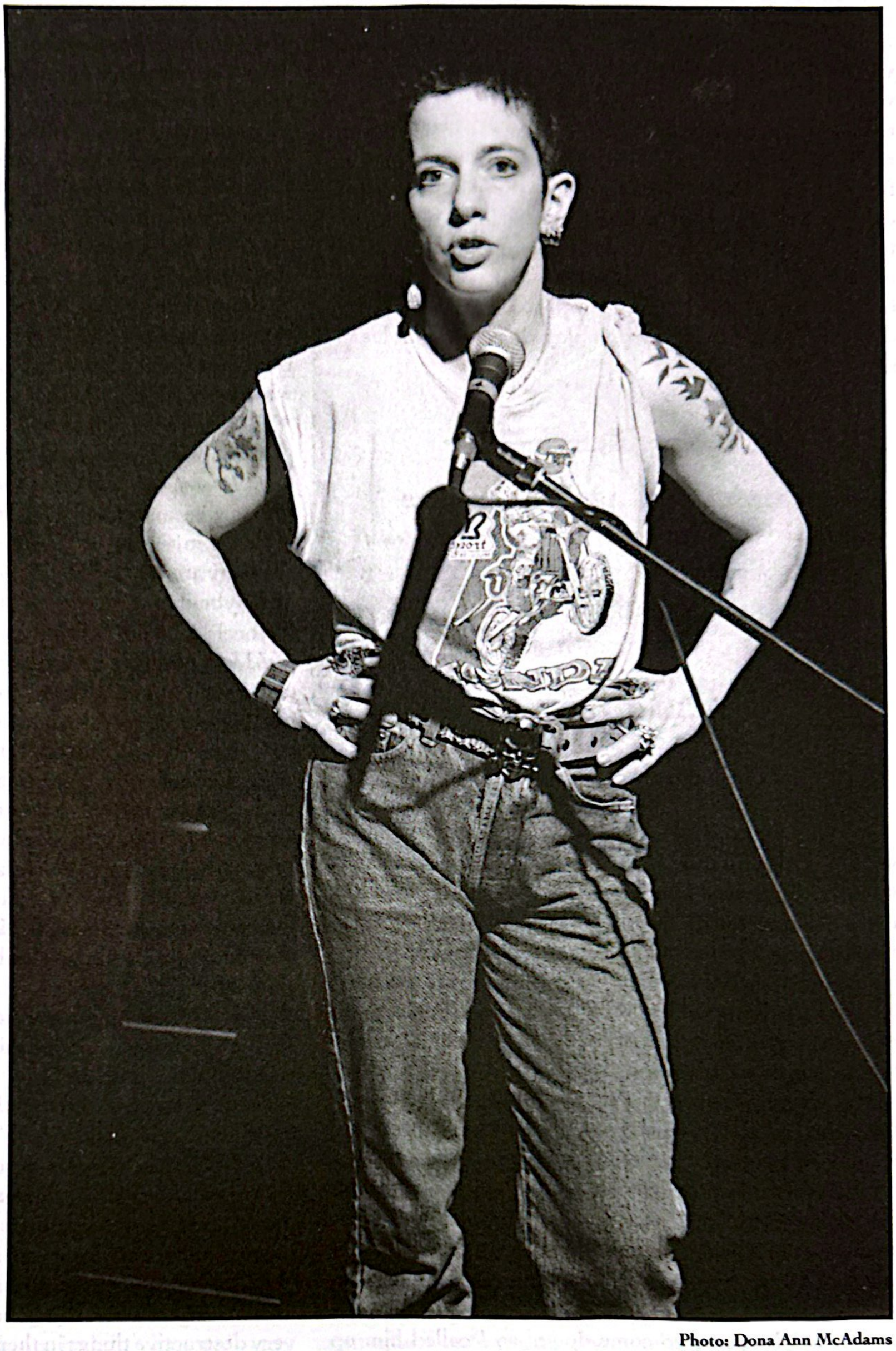

Photo: Dona Ann McAdams

◆ AJ: Another thing: liposuction and facelifts are very different from going to a tattoo artist. Getting a tattoo is a participatory experience. It is not like being anesthetized and flopped on a table like a cadaver who has just given up her body and soul for a period of time to this medical "institution"—usually a *male authority figure*—and getting plastic padding inserted underneath your nipple. And liposuction is far more painful; for months afterwards you feel "wrecked," you can't exercise, and you have to keep your body wrapped up. Surgery is pretty serious; it takes about 6 months to fully heal.

◆ KA: You're really messing your body up, then. I hate pain!

◆ AJ: Okay, if you hate pain, how does getting tattooed feel to you?

◆ KA: I hate it! It's not a high for me to get tattooed; I just love the tattoos! My idea of a good tattoo is one that doesn't hurt while it's being done. I'm really not into the pain of tattooing. It's one thing to control 2 or 3 minutes of pain, but after an hour of pure pain I think, "Fuck it!" A tattoo that takes 20 minutes—that's a kind of high. But 2 hours—forget it!

It's one thing to play with pain in an S&M context where: you play with things you don't like because you're scared of them. I really hate pain, so when I play with it I'm just seeing if I can endure it. It's like building muscle: you see if you can do another repetition. And I really have this thing about: "Go another step! Just go farther! Just go over another hill—there's another hill. Just go one little step farther!" I love doing that sort of thing. But if something gets *boring* and it's just about repetitiveness or unpleasantness . . . if you're tattooed for 2 hours, all it is for me is unpleasant, and I'd rather not feel it. Because there's no play there, I'm not learning anything—

I think you'd agree there are various things in us—not all of which are kind, gentle, and tender. But you can explore these things without becoming a mass murderer . . . without causing *real* damage, without turning to *real* crime.

♦ **AJ: Can you talk more about rites of passage?**

♦ KA: From what I understand, a rite of passage means a real change; you go through intense trauma or intense modification. The nearest I experienced to that was when I studied with a Korean Zen Master for about a year and then did a 3-day session with him. That was probably the strongest experience I've ever had in my life! Basically, we just sat in a room for 3 days; we didn't do anything (although we got up and went to sleep in the evening. I don't like to talk about these things too high-falutin' because of people's reactions). And at the end I had an interview with him. It felt like he just put his hand into my mind—literally! It *was* the most incredible experience I've ever had; the most radical. Is that a rite of passage? I don't know. I was very high afterwards; I was walking into cars—nothing happened to me, I was totally safe, but I wanted to come down, so I called him up and asked, "I'm too high—how do I come down?" and he said, "You're supposed to enjoy it! Oh—go get drunk!" So I went and got drunk, and that took care of that . . .

We don't have anything in our society that allows us to do a rite of passage *communally;* we do everything individually. Our own search is all done individually; now and then we might tell each other about it, but we always have the feeling we're being a bit "outside" the society when we tell each other. I mean, ecstasy—be it sexual (or some other kind of orgy) should be taking place somehow in our "community"—and it's not. *Our society gives us nothing.* We have no rites of passage—we have *nothing*—nothing that gives us any wisdom, that gives us any way of dealing with death, that gives us any way of going from one stage in life to another, or even telling us what a stage in our life *is.* We just grow up and earn money and have babies! And *work!* A holiday is degenerated from what should be ecstasy into sort of *Club Med!* We don't have any language with which to talk about these things.

♦ **AJ: That's why we're tripping over words all the time—**

♦ KA: Yeah! And then we make up these activities—tattooing and piercing—which is the nearest we get to a rite of passage. I mean, it's our way of doing it—that's what we're looking for.

♦ **AJ: Looking for what?**

♦ KA: Well, we're looking for a society that allows us *the fullness of what it is to be human,* I would think—it's hard to know because I've never been there! But I read about societies in which ecstasy and joy and certain areas of sexuality are venerated (not just in individual situations—or maybe it can be even individual experiences that go further). And: a whole range of feelings—really, a *fuller life!* I keep thinking: what we know of as "life" is so thin and juiceless and boring, frankly—we're ground into nothing before we even start out! I mean, take tattooing (which has been denied us for so long): it's beautiful, the colors are gorgeous, the images: if you have the tiger on you, you have the spirit of the tiger in you—that's *something:* to find out what it is to be an animal! We forget everything; we forget all of this!

♦ **AJ: Really, what we're talking about is: the quest for creativity, the quest for illumination—**

♦ KA: Well, I think that's what we *want!* We don't want to just work like *dogs*—

♦ **AJ: Or live on the surfaces of life.**

♦ KA: A "normal relationship" is usually a surface thing where you wake up and say to your husband, "Hi, honey!" and have breakfast together and bitch a little and at night get into bed and think, "Oh, I gotta fuck *again.*"

♦ **AJ: But there's also a societal control process to get rid of creativity in people, because that can be very dangerous: people exploring creativity, then taking power in the world.**

♦ KA: I guess there's always this argument about whether humans are naturally good or naturally have evil or very destructive things in them. Obviously we have some destructive urges in us. The feeling is that humans aren't totally good; they have to be *controlled* or else their violent destructive natures will come out. There are also libertarians who argue, "Humans are good; it's society which is repressive." I think you'd agree there are various things in us—not all of which are kind, gentle, and tender—readers of de Sade and Genet would probably agree on this point! But I think you can explore these things without becoming a mass murderer . . . without causing *real* damage, without turning to *real* crime.

One way of exploring these things is through *art;* there are various ways of doing this. We have to find out

how to have a community where the highest priority is to explore these different paths—to find out what it is to be human—and yet not wreak total havoc on the society! How can we have this freedom, so that society's not repressive, and yet it's not a society of mass murderers! And I don't think it's worthwhile making the problem too simple—I think if it were simple, it would have been solved long ago!

◆ **AJ: In Western society, the body tends to be identified with women and children and with uncontrollable forces of "nature" that are dangerous—therefore they have to be repressed.**

◆ KA: It's like Nietzsche's "Myth of the Eternal Return": you can view the world without "god" as "demonic" (in which *you* make the "demons" or the "horrible" forces of the body). Whereas: if you simply *accept* the Eternal Return, then the body becomes the area of joy, and you value life and you value all the changes and all that is in flux. So, how we can institute a society where that search is both individual and collective at the same time?

What society has done is: tried to make the search simply individual; also, label those individuals who are searching *with their bodies* as "weird," "evil," "freaks," "queer"—whatever words you want to use. But we could proclaim, "We're normal!" because we *are* normal! It's normal to love your body; it's normal to *have* a body; it's normal to see through the body and feel through the body. And during ecstasy, the body and the soul are united. So that's where the discussion about S&M ends up, really—

◆ **AJ: —and any discussion about body modification as well. We don't have a community; there is no communion; we're doing this individually . . . and yet there are attempts at making extended families, little communities—among many tattoo people there's certainly a bond.**

◆ KA: And among certain artists there's a network that's been going on . . .

◆ **AJ: And this network has to support individuals in their search for self-knowledge—**

◆ KA: Of course! You get through trauma by re-living the trauma, be it in fiction or in play. You don't get through trauma by *burying* it and not saying that it happened. If your attitude to "evil" or to something bad that happened is to just say, "Oh no, it didn't happen"—to shove it away—that just throws away an opportunity to grow. So if you want to say, "Women are totally equal to men; how can you say that women are submissive?" (in other words: you can't be a feminist if you say women are "submissive"), that's just shoveling it underground. Of course women are submissive: they've been *trained* to be submissive—that's the problem! And we get nowhere by not announcing the problem! It's like when black people decide to use the word "nigger," it's terrific in a way. We should take the word "submissive" and write it on the sky!

A woman who does a cutting on herself and lets herself bleed a little is hardly as unhealthy as a man who beats up his own wife. What so-called "normal" people do is so disgusting, that—! Someone who deliberately puts a few cigarette burns on their body is so much more healthy—well, at least they're trying to deal with it—

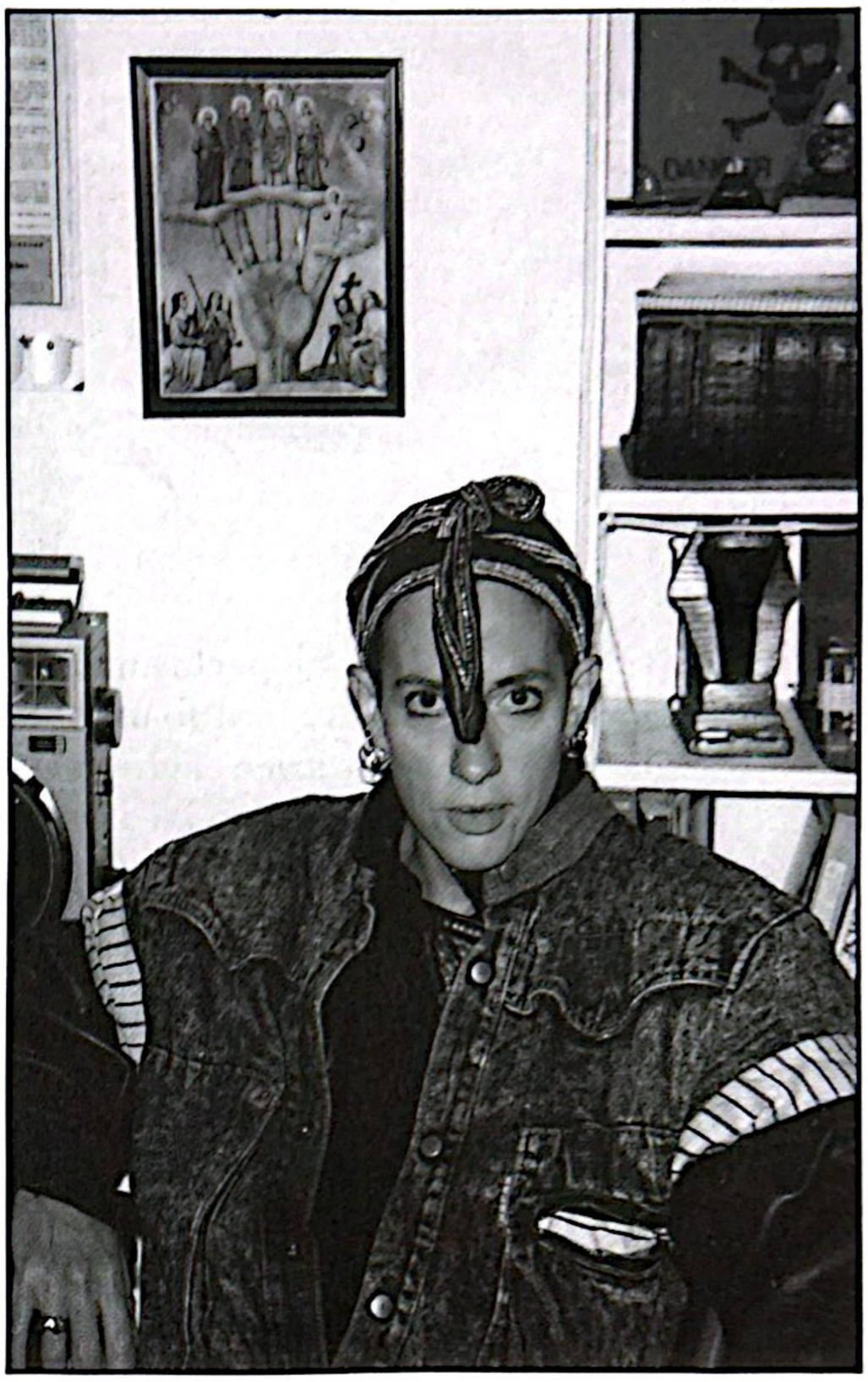

Photo: Vale

◆ **AJ: The body really is the only thing that you can control, and if you put a mark on your own body, it will heal—at least *you* own it.**

◆ KA: I used to cut my wrists, and I didn't do it just to die. I think (if I can remember the emotions) it was like: "Look, this incident has really hurt you—just look at how it's hurt you, and stop it right now!" It was a moment of *self-confrontation;* a way of telling myself, "Cut it out!" Or else, I'd do this to freak out somebody: "Look how you're hurting me! Stop it right now!" So this probably was not the most direct way of dealing with it, but . . .

There's a story about James Chance—he did a gig at a Mafia club in New York. Afterwards he asked to get paid and they said, "Fuck you—we're the Mafia and we're not going to pay you!" So he took out a razor blade, and they took out their guns ("Is this guy going to go for us?") and he just held it to his wrist and started cutting . . . They were so freaked out that they just threw the money at him and yelled, "Get outta here!" ◆ ◆ ◆